

Wither the CIS?

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The CIS summit finally took place in Moscow on April 29, but it did not answer the questions about the future of the CIS. The criticism of inadequacy and bureaucracy of the CIS structures voiced at the previous summit in Kishineu in October 1997, and blamed mainly on Russia, indicated that reforms were needed badly to reinvigorate the ailing entity. The dissolution of the CIS would deal a mortal blow to Russia's expectations to establish a post-Soviet union of former republics.

As the CIS seems to exist only because nobody has sufficient reasons to initiate the termination process, the member states rely little on it as a vehicle of promoting cooperation on various issues of interest. Without waiting for the CIS to reform, they enter "inner" communities and form international entities like the Russian-Belarusian Union (now with new Russian Prime Minister Sergei Kirienko as chairman of its executive committee), the Central Asian Union, and the so-called GUAM (Georgia-Ukraine-Azerbaijan-Moldova) axis, which has shown little action so far, but continues to be a balance to Russia's domination. Advocates of a closer integration now may quote another example in favor of strengthening ties - the new "inner" Customs Union of Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. The fifth member, Tajikistan, is expected to join the Customs Union soon. Practical implications of this admission may be Russia's continuing involvement in the ongoing civil war in Tajikistan, the increase of illegal migrants who will make use of the excessively "transparent" Tajik borders, in Russia and, eventually, in Ukraine, possible increase in the volume of drugs and illicit weapons smuggled from the Tajik territory to the other member states of the community and beyond. At the suggestion of Nursultan Nazarbayev, the five states signed a statement "On Ten Simple Steps Towards Simple People" and agreed on developing a draft treaty on creating a common economic environment to be discussed at the upcoming summit of the Customs Union in Akmola, Kazakhstan, in July 1998.

A LOST CHANCE FOR A "EURASIAN UNION"

President of Kazakhstan and one of the most active and devoted members of the CIS, Nursultan Nazarbayev has every reason to be unhappy with the outcome. His presentation of an agenda of reforming the CIS and creating a common economic environment was listened to with due interest but little enthusiasm to start the transformation right now. Nazarbayev's idea of the common economic environment included coordination of member states' tariff policies (in terms of import and export dues), abolition of quotas and other non-tariff regulations, creation of a "symmetric" system of levying VAT and excise tax in mutual trade operations, alleviation of limitations and obstacles to transit of goods produced by the CIS member states, and creation of conditions for access to each other's markets of financial services. Finally, the concept envisaged elimination of barriers created by governmental protectionism. This point runs counter the policy of "protecting the national manufacturer", currently the beloved slogan of both the Ukrainian President and his opponents.

Nazarbayev's idea of "ten simple steps towards simple people" is reported to be designed to ease travelling between the CIS member states, to assist people in obtaining citizenship and enjoying other rights, to create a joint information and education environment. Specifically, the program is reported to include a "green corridor" for citizens of the Customs Union members, a permission to carry up to US\$ 10,000 without restrictions and up to 100 kilos of luggage free of charge, a simplified procedure of money transfers, equal rights for citizens of each of the four states to enter colleges and universities of the other states, and provisions for the most favorable conditions for doing small and medium business on the territory of any of the member states. "Who needs supranational formations that do not help anything?" said he in an interview to the Den, "Currently there are 1,500 persons in the CIS organs - I don't know what they do, and nobody knows. [Instead] I suggest to establish one executive body with departments: the secretariat, the economic committee, the councils of defence and foreign ministers... But decisions about reforming the CIS organs will be a collective one, a decision of all presidents." The present situation in the CIS is reflected in Nazarbayev's statement: "[i]f my proposals do not suit somebody in Russia because they are the proposals of Nazarbayev, I am prepared to give away the praise." "The big ones want to dominate," said he.

The chance to reform the CIS "from above" seems to be lost. Particularly now, when the appointment of the businessman with a controversial record, former deputy chairman of the Russian Security Council Boris Berezovsky to run the Secretariat suggests that the CIS may rather be reformed "from below" by national and multinational interest groups whose business interests are likely to be more motivating in transforming the amorphous CIS into a cooperative environment.

Boris Berezovsky was nominated by Leonid Kuchma (according to other sources, by Kuchma and Georgian president Eduard Shevardnadze) to substitute politically insignificant Belarusian Ivan Korotchenya who had been executive secretary of the CIS since 1991. Berezovsky's former superior in the Security Council, smooth performer Ivan Rybkin was put in charge of the CIS affairs in the Russian government. The changes are expected to make the Commonwealth work due to Rybkin's skill of being an all-positive face-figure and Berezovsky's ability to use his own levers to achieve a set goal.

UKRAINE AND THE CIS

Ukraine's attitude to the CIS is critical for Moscow in maintaining the CIS. Therefore, the meeting of Boris Yeltsin and Leonid Kuchma on the eve of the summit was designed to demonstrate a new spirit of friendship between the two states, particularly noteworthy in the context of the forthcoming 1999 presidential elections in Ukraine and Boris Yeltsin's promise to support his Ukrainian counterpart's re-election ambitions. At the meeting with Yeltsin, Leonid Kuchma assured him that "information of the press that Ukraine is against new forms of cooperation within the CIS is a distortion of reality". Boris Yeltsin responded by stating that "things are going more gleefully now". Ukraine stands for reforming the CIS structures so that to give priority to bilateral relations, and rules out the provision of a supranational status to the CIS and making it a subject of international law. Meeting his Russian counterpart, Ukraine's newly-appointed Foreign Minister Borys Tarasiuk, known as an advocate of the pro-Western direction of Ukraine's "multivector" foreign policy, suggested that this country would like to see the Commonwealth of Independent States to be an international mechanism of multilateral consultations and negotiations. The mechanism, in his view, would compliment the process of shaping new kinds of bilateral relations between the member states. The CIS was described as instrumental in fulfillment of bilateral agreements, primarily, economic ones, and aiming at securing all member states' national interests. Before coming to Moscow, Tarasiuk visited Poland and Hungary to meet his counterparts and presidents of those states, as well as the Estonian president and Lithuanian prime minister who were visiting Warsaw.

Although economic relations are presented as the rationale for maintaining the CIS and, in Ukraine's opinion, may be implemented via the Ashgabat free trade agreement, creation of a common economic space does not appear to be operational and is off the agenda now. "It is free trade, and not the common economic space that is the most important [thing] for the Commonwealth now", Leonid Kuchma was quoted as saying by the Interfax press agency. According to Kuchma, who described current discussions of introduction of a free trade regime as "both unrealistic and naive", the Commonwealth-wide free trade zone should be started with bilateral, tri- and fourpartite agreements between the member states. Instead, Leonid Kuchma suggested it would be effective to create several "common spaces" in key sectors, including a common market of agriculture products, a common transportation space, etc. As one can clearly see, the choice of "spaces" reflects Ukraine's strong points. Before leaving for Moscow, Leonid Kuchma discussed the would be "common economic space" in telephone conversations with other presidents known to have reservations about close integration - Petr Luchinsky (Moldova), Islam Karimov (Uzbekistan) and Saparmurad Niyazov (Turkmenistan). The leaders stressed their interest in development of regional cooperation.

In addition to the key issue, the summit addressed development of military cooperation within the CIS (with Ukraine still abstaining from joining the Tashkent pact) and appointing a commander to the collective peacekeeping force in Abkhazia and Georgia. No usual declaration on "further development of equal partnership" was adopted, possibly due to the lack of consensus on approaches to solving territorial disputes. Thus, the issue of the CIS future remains open.